

As soon as the last cargo chute touches down the men begin to retrieve their gear and equipment. This task would normally take a crew this size about 15 minutes to complete, but because they were dropped from such a high altitude and the cargo chutes are scattered across the upper end of the gulch, it takes the crew 45 minutes to an hour to gather up the parachutes and pack the cargo packs to a central location Dodge has selected near the bottom of the drainage. This extra 30-45 minutes becomes critical time lost in their race with the fire later that afternoon.

At about 5:00 PM Foreman Dodge instructs the crew to grab a bite to eat, get some water, gather their hand tools and follow him up the south side of the canyon to the fire on the ridge. He tells them he's going to go up to the fire and tie in with the guy who has been yelling and whistling (Jim Harrison).

Leaving the crew under Bill Hellman's command, Dodge drops into the drainage bottom and then heads up the hill for the ridgeline and the fire. Though the timber is quite thick, Dodge is able to contact Jim Harrison in short order. But, once on the fireline Dodge is concerned about how actively the fire is burning. He makes a quick assessment and instructs Harrison to follow him and join the rest of the crew. Dodge and Harrison then retrace Dodge's route heading back to the cargo assembly area near the draw bottom. However, when they are about half-way down the slope they encounter the rest of the jumper crew headed up to the fire with Hellman in the lead.

Dodge explains to Hellman that he doesn't like the looks of things on the ridge and instructs Hellman to take the crew and head them down the gulch to the Missouri River. His thinking is to attack the fire from the rear and the safety of the river. Dodge adds that he and Harrison are going to proceed on to the cargo spot to get water and something to eat.

While all this is taking place, Jansson and Hersey have been busy organizing their small force of 19 firefighters and getting them transported from Helena to the Gates of the Mountains Boat Club launch and then down river. On his first trip down the river Jansson decides the mouth of Mann Gulch is no place for a firecamp and moves the location to Meriwether. Here he quickly sets up a camp and dispatches Hersey and the 19 men to the fire and the top of the ridge. He is concerned about Jim Harrison's whereabouts since Jim was supposed to report in on the radio at 3:00 PM and no one has heard from him. Jansson assumes---correctly it turns out--that Harrison has tied in with the smokejumper crew.

At about 5:02 PM, after several vain attempts to scout out the fire from several locations in a boat on the river, Jansson is dropped at the mouth of Mann Gulch and begins to hike up the drainage bottom to both see where the fire is burning and to try to make contact with the jumpers. He proceeds up the draw bottom several hundred yards and encounters the fire. Somewhat foolishly it turns out, Jansson picks his way through the burning trees, brush and grass and continues up the draw. In the midst of the conflagration he thinks he hears someone shouting and pushes on until finally the heat and smoke are just too much. He turns around only to find he appears to be trapped in the flames and smoke. Knowing his only escape is back towards the river, Jansson runs and dives through the dense smoke and fire. He makes it through but then passes out for a few minutes, probably from smoke inhalation. He comes to, is immediately sick and then vomits violently. After a few moments he gets back to his feet and picks his way through the fire back to the boat still waiting for him at the river. He is returned to the firecamp at Meriwether.

Back up in Mann Gulch it's about 5:40 PM. Dodge and Harrison, after returning to the cargo area, finally head down the north side of the gulch and catch up with the rest of the crew strung out in a single file, still heading for the river. When Dodge catches up with the crew he takes the lead and places Hellman at the rear.

It's important to recognize that up to this point there's been no sense of urgency about this fire. The men have calmly eaten dinner and are walking at a normal pace as they head for the safety of the river. As they walk down the gulch jumper David Navon even stops long enough to take a snapshot of the fire. There's no great hurry, certainly no panic.

At about 5:45 PM Wag Dodge at the head of the column of men starts up a small finger ridge which up to this point obscures his view to the river. When he reaches the top of this ridge he immediately sees the fire has somehow jumped from the south side of the gulch and is now burning furiously below them on the north side of the gulch. Worse still, the fire is now burning up-hill to the north and west of where he's standing. Their escape route to the river is now cut off.

Dodge quickly moves to the end of the line of men and sends Hellman to what was formerly the head of the line. The line of men reverses its route of travel with Dodge in the lead and they begin to obliquely head for the ridgeline in a northwesterly direction, directly away from the direction the fire is now travelling on the north side of Mann Gulch.

They proceed in this direction for several minutes, but the going is tough. They're headed up-slope, the slope is steep, the footing is treacherous. They've picked their way across three rock fields, but they're still several hundred yards shy of the ridgetop. The fire is steadily advancing toward them and at this point it's only 150 to 200 yards behind them and gaining fast.

It's 5:53 PM and Dodge realizes that at the rate they're moving up the slope they're not going to make it. He turns to his crew and says, "Throw everything away that's heavy". The men drop their shovels, their pulaskis, the two crosscut saws they're carrying, and other gear. But to some of the crew members Dodge's order isn't clear. Harrison retains his heavy smokechaser pack and his pulaski. Diettert keeps both his shovel and his pulaski until Walt Rumsey takes the shovel and tosses it down the hill. The line of men continues to struggle diagonally up the slope for another two minutes, but the pitch of the hillside approaches 76% here and the line of men stretches out and they find themselves going more across the hillside and not up toward the ridgeline.

At 5:55 PM, as the line of men breaks out of a finger of big ponderosa pine trees and into a grassy opening on the steep hillside, Dodge---without a word to anyone---pauses, knells down and with a match from a book of paper matches sets fire to the grass in front of him. The fire springs up in the dry grass and in a matter of seconds starts burning directly up the hill. Dodge's fire burns off no more than a ten foot by ten foot square area when he runs up the right side, leaps over the flames and into the freshly blackened area. To those nearest him he yells, "Up this way!" Sallee, Rumsey and Diettert, who are in the line just behind Dodge don't understand Dodge's order to get into the blackened and burned area. They think Dodge intends for his fire to be some sort of buffer between them and the main fire, which is rapidly closing in on them, and they run around the right side of his still burning escape fire and head directly up the slope and for the ridgetop. Bill Hellman, who was posted at the back of the crew when they reversed their direction of travel a few minutes ago, is now up near the head of the line. When he hears Dodge's "Up this way", Hellman says, "To hell with that, I'm getting out of here" and he starts for the ridgeline on the left flank of Dodge's fire.